"Greatest Moments of Pride" Contest Winners:

THIRD PRIZE

ACTING OUT

Continued from page 24.

Well, I certainly took men home, but they were usually drunks like myself and by the time we got to my house we were usually too drunk to have sex and passed out on the bed like two beached whales. This is the main reason I am HIV negative today. Ironically, alcohol may have saved my life, though of course it could have killed me—many a time, I crossed Market Street at Castro seeing four sets of traffic lights and weaving unsteadily through oncoming traffic in the wee hours of the morning. Someone once said that God looks after drunks and fools. This certainly seems to have been so in my case. I never had an accident though I did have several close calls.

In the midst of my six-week drunken spree, I met Will, my first boyfriend. He was, and still is, as far as I know, a handsome older man from the South, a falling down drunk and taxi driver (a scary thought in itself!). Poor Will was impotent (probably due to alcohol abuse) and that fact plus our heavy boozing reduced what might have been a nice sex life to practically no sex. But I learned to sleep with a man night after night unafraid.

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We kissed and cuddled and fought horribly. My drinking did not stop at the end of the six weeks; in fact it got worse. I kidded myself that I drank only to "keep up with Will." I began to hang out with drug dealers. I felt I was going downhill fast, so I moved to Iowa to "clean up my act," leaving poor Will in the dust. I went to Iowa in order to study at the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. I started trying to control my drinking. I got some stable, normal-drinking friends.

Then the unimaginable happened: I met a hunky young man 10 years younger than I and we became lovers. Richard was not a drunk. He was emotionally stable. I took him hostage, however; I was extremely possessive of my "prize." I had it in my mind he was my "one and only love" and that I'd never get another. I clung to him with a vengeance. Naturally he felt trapped and began to cheat on me.

My drinking got worse again as I drowned sorrows and self pity in a sea of wine and Scotch. In 1981, Richard graduated from the University and went home to Long Island, N.Y., to look after his dying father. I graduated shortly thereafter and moved to Manhattan to try to save our rocky relationship. I began to make scenes with him in bars and restaurants, telling him in no uncertain terms just how to run his life, how to get his act together when in fact his act was much more together than mine! One night I got eighty-sixed from a bar for masturbating. A straight woman sitting next to me had rightly complained to the management. Since I was in a blackout at the time, I had no knowledge or memory of the incident and thought the management was inventing the story in order to have an excuse to throw me out. I told my friends that the management was prejudiced against people in wheelchairs. (I couldn't accuse the management of homophobia as it was a gay bar!)

Two nights later, after another blackout in which I made yet another scene with Richard in a restaurant, he walked out on me. The next day, hung over and in despair, I met a woman in a sidewalk cafe. I poured my heart out to her, told her I was worried about my drinking. She told me that she was a recovering alcoholic five years sober and went to a local support group and to therapy. The combination had, she said, kept her sober. She was on her way, in fact, to a meeting of her support group and asked me if I'd like to go with her. To my amazement, I said "Yes." I've been going to support groups and therapy ever since.

It's now been 13 years since I drank any alcohol. I feel more "out" now than ever I did when drunk in the Castro 15 years ago. Sober, I was a college professor in New York for 10 years. In 1991, a TV producer heard me give a talk on my recovery from alcoholism. He asked me if I had ever acted. I said "No." (I thought of all the times I had drunkenly leaned over to my unfortunate "companion of the evening" and said, "You know, if I hadn't been disabled, I'd have been an actor." The reply was usually "So be an actor!" But then I'd say, "How many parts are there for a person like me?" "Write your own part," they'd say.) The TV producer asked me if I had any material of my own I could perform.

While at Iowa, I had written a book of poems in the voice of Achille Emperaire, a little-known painter and lifelong friend of Paul Cezanne. Achille was a dead ringer for me and had the same brittle bone condition. The producer read the poems and loved them. I turned the book into a play. A friend of mine, Michael Anthony Thomas, said he'd direct it. I took acting lessons. I performed the play in friends' houses. It soon became obvious that it worked best as a stage play rather than a video piece.

I have since performed the play, now called "The Blaspheming Moon," at a number of venues—colleges and small theaters—up and down the Eastern Seaboard. My moment of pride came at the Center Gallery in Albany, N.Y. in 1991. I received a standing ovation for my performance. The audience was mostly straight and conservative seeming.

It wasn't the ovation that made me proud, though that was very gratifying, of course. It was the fact that here I was, a gay disabled man from another country, a minority within a minority within a minority, playing a gay man on stage and being absolutely myself. People who've never acted are under the illusion that a good actor learns to do a great job of pretending to be the character in question: this is not the case. When you're fully in the role, you are absolutely yourself. You are the character and yourself at the same time.

That's what happened that night in Albany. I was in touch not only with Achille, but with my inner spirit, my true, gay self—sober, happy, joyous and free. Whenever I feel down or sorry for myself, I look at the photo of myself, taken just after I came off stage that night by my friend Barbara Landis, and I feel proud, proud and very, very fortunate.

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